

Northern Strength and Weakness An Address on Occasion of the National Fast

April 30, 1863

Delivered in Watertown by Rev. John Weiss

Transcribed by Mary Katherine May of Quality Music and Books

Two years have passed away since the first gun of treason summoned Americans to the defence of their form of government, and to a fresh valuation of the principals which it pretended to represent. Men live fast in such times, and gray hairs make more rapidly than usual. We have been sternly taught to know things never before suspected; to hurriedly revise what we knew previously; to count our acquisitions by the marks of suffering. There is no doubt that the country has made progress in self-knowledge. Can it show any progress in the vindication of her best ideas?

The Northern mind has been, till very lately, so desponding, that a person ignorant of affairs would have presumed failure at most points, and in directions the most vital. Never was melancholy so causeless, or so continually threatened by the facts. The American man of business is trained in a poor school, if a tenacious cheeriness be any thing worth a man's while to protect and cultivate. His moods follow the fluctuations of trade, the condition of the market, the prospects for crops and supplies, the rise and fall of stocks. He watches every thing nervously,--the total of exports and imports, the rates of exchange and insurance, the complexion of local politics. Every bulletin extravagantly raises or depresses him. A victory is on the point of quenching the Rebellion; a defeat is sure to precipitate foreign intervention. Unhappily, we are a reading people, and newspapers are not dear. We should have been happier if we had not devoured so many columns of special correspondents' views.--men on the spot with powerful microscopes, who hold up the war, as a lecturer displays a drop of putrid water, to startle and distress us with the monstrous vices and mistakes it has engendered. "Can the country swallow this, and live?" we have exclaimed. Yes, all this, and more, as harmlessly as water. Too many newspapers put the country's happiness to peril more certainly than all those inevitable accessories of a great contest like that which we have waged, and are on the point of bringing to a successful termination.

Let a brief retrospect instruct our fears. What was the task which lay before us two years ago, and how much of it has been accomplished? When President Lincoln called for seventy thousand men, and the rioters at Montgomery were laughing at his simplicity, a great slaveholding tendency was on the point of consolidating every Southern and Border State into the unity of Rebellion. The sin of fifty years rose wrathfully, and held its poisoned cup to the trembling lips of the country. Not a Border State would send a man to cover Washington. Governors insulted the Executive with impunity, and encouraged citizens to arm in the interest of treason rather than law.

Forts, arsenals, and navy-yards, points of defence, and the means for defending, fell into rebellious hands. Washington had slavery behind and before, determined, malignant, commanding every approach, conscious of secret treason at the North that was supported by a widely ramified society. Some of the best officers of the army and the navy turned their swords against the mother's bosom that had just nourished them. Ships and regiments were scattered. There was distraction in the place of concentration, a deliberate undervaluing of the hostile power, a delusive expectation of some early adjustment. Every thing conspired to paralyze the country, and to make disunion an accomplished fact.

In this condition, we commenced the undertaking to repossess important points, to recover control of the great streams and harbors, and to slowly press back the tide of Rebellion. At the most, we hoped to preserve neutrality among the Border States; and as for the institution of slavery, that was still the great American taboo, upon which no hand could be laid.

We began with secret treason at home, and ill-will abroad. We were embarrassed by not exactly knowing the extent of the hostile feelings, and what influence they would exert. At this time, the boundary of the United States of North America could be drawn with difficulty from Fortress Monroe, skipping treasonable countries along the Chesapeake, avoiding Baltimore, clinging to the Pennsylvania line, and down the Ohio as far as Cairo. As a boy plays hop-scotch, it might be traced from the Atlantic to the Mississippi; and there it stopped; and nothing but the sudden uprising of the people kept it there for awhile, till the process of reconstruction could commence. In the Gulf of Mexico, the flag waved over the single sand island upon which Fort Pickens is built.

We really knew nothing of the art of war, nor how armies should be enrolled, disciplined, victualled, and clothed. We had no improved cannon or projectiles. Routine pervaded the service by sea and land; an iron-clad was undreamed of; cavalry was considered superfluous; political aspirants hastened for commissions, and avaricious traders began plundering the Government by contract. The first popular enthusiasm was the only gleam that shot athwart this sullen sky; and notwithstanding this enthusiasm, that ignorance pervaded the popular mind as to the historical emergency! Few persons counted correctly the strokes of the hour which was striking. The political and moral connection of events with the past history of the country; the absolute necessity of the struggle; the impossibility of a peaceful solution; the terrible purpose of the slave-power; the insignificance of the slave, his dread of rising, his inability to help us, his immense importance as the war-making power of a secession movement,- what crude and contradictory theories were afloat respecting the real nature and the elements of the crisis! Such ignorance is more weakening than the defection of fleets and armies; for it was continually sending a boy to perform a man's errand. When the history of a nation

is reaching suddenly forward to a great conclusion, what kind of a gesture will she make, if the people she wants to save have not made up their minds that they really need vigorous saving, and complain that she pulls them along in striding? The politicians tried to catch this winged History, and harness her to her plough. In fifty days, this rugged bit of ground would be turned up, and the season's work well over. But the ploughshare of God's thought, driven by the dread event, was cleaving the nation's mind, and laying it open to the sun and rain of heaven. History has underscored her intentions with the blood of two campaigns. She said, "Absolute freedom, all the rights of man to all men, union for the sake of liberty;" but we heard it not till successive cannon thunders translated it into the vernacular.

But, although this position seemed gloomy enough, how would gloom have deepened if we could have foreseen every complication, obstacle, and distress which war itself has developed! To have anticipated, under those early circumstances, a struggle of this magnitude, and crowded with such tremendous embarrassments, would have sent the people's blood from the cheek to the heart, routed in advance by the appalling prospect. Fortunately, the war and the people have grown together, and every nettle of danger has unexpectedly put forth a flower of safety.

What, then, has been achieved?

The boundary of the United States has been steadily encroaching upon the eclipse of Rebellion, and the line has never for a moment receded. Following the Potomac to the Blue Bridge, it runs down to North Carolina, cutting in half the Old Dominion. Tennessee will soon plant the flag upon her southern limit, on its way to the Gulf. Practically, Kentucky belongs to the United States, notwithstanding her disloyal element. Self interest will soon compel her to share the sentiment which has fixed Missouri irrevocably upon the Northern side. Of all the points which we have recovered by land or sea, we have lost again only the harbor of Galveston. If we speak of immediate probabilities, it is reasonable to say, that we shall control Mississippi; and when the United States pass freely up and down that stream, its western bank will not long be the limit of their practical jurisdiction.

We have tried the strength of Northern treason; we know where it is, and what its means and objects are. In every town and village of the North, the members of the two classes--sympathizers with slavery, and opponents of the Administration--are known. Disaffection is unmasked, and brought to daylight, where it chafes hitherto in vain against the deliberate purpose of the people. This is one of the greatest achievements of the war.

We need not speak of the improvements in the service by land and sea; they are too numerous. In the act of engaging the enemy, we learn to improve our whole equipment; in protecting the national life, we test each novelty of warfare for the benefit of the civilized world; so that, when we emerge from this contest, it will be with an intelligence formidably armed, springing like Minerva, full-panoplied, from the racking forehead of the country.

Foreign intervention, which was never imminent, is now less probable than ever. The people of England are becoming instructed upon the cause and object of the Rebellion. We may well grant them a little time to acquire a healthy opinion on this point; for we took some time ourselves; it had been beaten into our heads as into theirs. The attack of the French upon Mexico was an imperial speculation, inspired by glory, Catholicism, stockjobbing, and the chance of swindling or of helping the Confederate States according to events. The unexpected resistance of the Mexicans continues to save us from a possible complication in that quarter; while the Polish insurrection is a European event of so grave a nature, that it distracts the single purpose of the French emperor. Indeed, it is in my opinion, that this spark, which we call the Polish revolution, will run through all the liberal tinder of Europe; it will spread, and not go down. If a man is disposed to take advantage of your embarrassments the least gesture from afar may divert his glance just long enough till you recover a position. The snapping of a twig scares the tiger from his meditated spring.

And what solid triumphs have been wrested from slavery itself! What are slaves worth in Delaware? What will an able-bodied negro sell for in Maryland, in Western Virginia, in Missouri, and up and down the Mississippi? What is slavery worth today in Louisiana? Not so much as the buttons on Gen. Banks's coat. Emancipation has been proclaimed in the District of Columbia. Slavery is henceforth illegal in the Territories of the United States. Maryland, Missouri, Western Virginia, will accept the schemes of compensation. What will slavery, thus girdled by free States, be worth in Kentucky and Tennessee? And the great Proclamation of the new year speaks a word which cannot be recalled,--a legal word, that lifts the idea of emancipation into its place of power in Congress, in the Judiciary, in every department of the Government, into every town-meeting between the Atlantic and Pacific. Will a premature peace, followed by political intrigue, be able to dislodge it? The past, at least, is secure. The country has let loose a tendency that will become greater than its actual triumphs, if the people continue to hold Northern treason under foot, till victory, followed by an armed occupation of rebellious States, shall make the Presidential word take flesh upon every plantation, and chattels shall stand up living souls.

Let us not omit from our estimate the effect this struggle in refining and lifting up the people's hearts. War does not debase a country which wages it to sustain national

existence, and to promote the welfare of mankind. When passion and self-interest inspire a war, defeat is a great blessing. Our costly suffering will be the salvation of the South, as it has been the ennobling of ourselves. When every State can count its graves by thousands of sons who took the field for the common defence, from Maine to Missouri, for whom all the ordinary implements of trade and labor were welded into a weapon, and all the customary feelings into a sentiment of duty, there is a unity, like that which sorrow creates within a house. Tidings of wounds and death travel to and fro on every wire; but the telegraph itself does not connect these States together so firmly as the news does which it transmits. There is a common throb of anguish and pride, a common awe in the presence of the invisible, a common glory in that death came in the way of duty. In this religious stillness there is an opportunity for the most precious of the country's ideas to take root and flourish. When sometimes I hear a father read those tender letters, which contain last messages delivered from some comrade's pen, the sole relics of death's moment in the skirmish and the battle, it seems to me as if the souls of these brave sons had not gone to heaven, but had come home. Death said to them, "Your country must be reinforced;" and they hasten to the call, to deepen our religiousness, inflame our patriotism, and confirm our thoughts with the sincerity which they gained by dying.

Notwithstanding the flattering nature of this retrospect which the Divine Providence has secured for us, there is matter enough for humiliation. It is no formal confession of generalities which we have to make at the call of the President. This unfinished war is itself a witness against that unfaithfulness of the popular mind, which was willing to see the evils of the country to be monstrous, that nothing but the sword could cure them. And the duration of the war will measure the extent and virulence of the sins which thrived upon empathy. The axe is laid unto the root. This is one of the great periods in the life of a people when God grows tired of compromises, and hews down every tree which does not bear his fruit. We have not yet touched the bottom of this war which is our retribution. Slavery drew a portion of its vitality from Northern soil. Its subtle rootlets undermined the surface, and fastened to every thing that was immoral and unmanly in the Northern heart. Can their intricate clasp be undone without drawing deeply on our blood? They are not yet undone; and God's right hand shall pull at them, and tear them away, though pieces of the flesh go with them, if our hearts will not make a cheaper sacrifice. Have we stood for two years amid these graves, and have not discerned that this is a day of God's coming, when he shall thoroughly purge his threshing-floor of this Republic, and gather up his wheat? Who is this that cometh with bloody garments, trampling hearts like grapes for the new wine of his kingdom? It is the long-suffering God of the inexorable justice. When the worst comes, and he has to choose between sparing our hearts and sparing his immutable decrees, he rises terribly, and casts our hearts into his wine press. Oh, wonderful maker of the

world's sound vintages! Out of these very hearts his justice is expressed. We suffer, but yield the fruit of righteousness.

So long as the war lasts, it is a judge that sits in purple robes, and calls a delinquent people to its feet. How mad we were with money and the wild joys of speculation! How luxury and profuse display, and vulgar styles of living, built their streets of palaces, and sat within, scoffing at all gentleness, humility, and temperance, and forbidding even the broken victuals to be tossed to the Golden Rule that begged at the proud doors! The merchant and the politicians lobbied against Beatitudes. Intellect was salaried to believe and teach a lie. How the nation laughed when the words of scorn rolled beneath the dome-like forehead!--"There is no higher law. Take an eagle's flight above the Alleghanies, and find no higher law. There is nothing better than the laws which men have made." And the merchants, and the ministers, and the lawyers, and the judges laughed, and said "Amen!" And all the little traders thanked God that there was no higher law. But God answers to-day, and the message leaps from every cannon,--"Unless my law be within your laws, woe to your laws!"

How the politicians built their platforms, and cringed as Slavery ascended the steps to dictate its crime to freedom! How the people thundered their affirmative to resolutions which denied the first principles of the country, and the real spirit of her Constitution, by denying the natural rights of man! And all the merchants with Southern connections said that conscience itself was a luxury, which they would give up to save the Union. Now, the Union and conscience are the same: if conscience be delivered, the Union is saved. The Union and conscience are together on the rack of war: the tie stretches to the point of breaking. Without conscience, it will fly apart like ravelled tow.

How we amused ourselves with an inferior and degraded race of people! We had cant names for them, and saluted them with coarse noises in the street. We crowded into places of entertainment where the peculiarities of their body and mind were seasoned with jests and music, till the most popular amusement of the middle class of this nation turned upon the degradation of another class. Can a people do that, and live? --laugh in that way, without drawing tears mingled with blood? Can the heart derive a harmless pleasure from the shame and suffering of the unprotected? See how coarse the people grew in consequence of that! How little they thought of the base act of returning a fugitive! and how much sublimer they thought an Ethiopian entertainment was than the golden rule of him who said "Inasmuch as ye did it not to them, ye did it not to me"! And now, because we did it not to them, the same heavenly voice cries "Depart--into the fire of battle; become purges by fire!" And the race which we despised so smilingly is called by God to take rank with us in battle, beneath the flag which we thought waved only for the white men; whose stars we scornfully imagined were emblems of exclusive truths and privileges. There is nothing exclusive in the designs which God has for a

country. When he would raise up a nation, he is no respecter of persons. It is not your privilege even to bleed and die exclusively. The slave must see the stars where before he saw only the stripes, else you will change places with him as the stars are blotted from our firmament. This day, God dips a people's contempt in blood.

How well the negro contrasts his occasional noble services with this contempt! What did one say, when a flat-boat, filled with soldiers, grounded under the shower of the enemy's bullets in attempting to land at Rodman's Point? He was the only negro on board. All the soldiers prostrated themselves in the bottom of the boat to escape fire. "Somebody's got to die to git us out of dis," he said; "and it may as well be me." He succeeded in pushing off the boat, and fell pierced by five bullets. Yes, somebody's got to die to get out of this. The instinct of the country spoke in the heroism of this despised and rejected man.

But our contempt is not yet all dipped in the sacrificial stream. The nation still holds in its bosom the men who deny all rights except their own, and who want a Constitution, as old tyrants wanted the *peine forte et dure*,--a machine to squeeze out of other men their breath. This vulgar and malignant element, which parades the sacred name of Democracy, has survived the chastening of the war, still dreams and plots an ignominious peace, and prevents a perfect sacrifice from being offered up to God. It hates the slave, as it ever did; it hates the slave's friend, as it ever must do; it hates the rolling of the wheels of God's mercy; it loves itself, and hates mankind as despots hate who honestly pronounce their proper name. Is this a day of humiliation? Who, I pray you, shall be humiliated on this day, if it be not the man who is willing to transmit another war to his children by transmitting its yet unvanquished cause; whose sympathies are with the class that lives by the exclusive privilege; who is willing to take that slaveholding hand which is dipped to the elbow and the armpit in the blood of the honest farmers' sons and of mechanics, who are bone and gristle of a true Democracy? For shame, false Democrats, false editors of treason, false freemen, who care for all this blood no more than if it ran, a pig's slaughter, in the gutter; who would sell it all to have slavery back tomorrow, as men sell bullocks' blood to manufacturers! To have written above all these graves, "This man died to let slavery back again into America,--would you like to have that epitaph of your splendid friends at Newbern, in the stout intrenchment of Washington, before Vicksburg and Frederickburg, in Nims's battery, or Dupont's fleet? May God save them, but not save them to see the other graves so insulted and dishonored! The blood which your children spilt at Antietam, and all along the ravening fronts of battle, must nourish God, not Satan. See to it that slavery does not taste a drop of that redeeming liquid. See to it by humiliating the men who will not humiliate themselves in this time of your trials. The shield which History shall lift up in the face of your country's future will have one side lustrous with the names of your maimed or dead preservers, and the other side infamous with the names of your living

betrayers. Every town and village shall furnish its list of glory and of shame to make the record true.

We have all cause for humiliation in the weakness of our moral convictions. In this protracted struggle, despondency has often seized us because we have secretly doubted whether, after all, Slavery were not as strong as Freedom. Many people begin to say, that it is only a question of time and numbers, and that the side which has the last dollar will preserve or dissolve the Union. This shows a wavering faith in the ideas which the Union represents. Men are astonished to find the South so capable of resistance, and so well provided at every point with all the latest requisites of warfare. They recognize in its unanimity and tenacity the elements which have lent success to every cause. The Rebellion is a lens, which brings all the intelligence and passion of the South concentrated into fiery focus, which its leaders flash in our faces whithersoever we turn. All its women are of one mind and resolution: their hatred of the North is a fresh soul to slavery. Even the best lyric which the war has produced has been written on the Southern side, and sings a happy inspiration of pathos and high resolve. If in the beginning we doubted whether Southern men were in earnest, that doubt has been buried in a hundred thousand graves.

We have been so often baffled, that some have secretly whispered, "Perhaps, after all, God intends to make two nations here, and to grant a lease of brilliant existence to a slaveholding Republic, such as Athens and Sparta were. The best we can do is to maintain against it the southernmost possible line, and set up the glory of free labor and intelligence." It seems to some people as if this contest has become a fight between two powers of nearly equal consideration in the sight of History and Providence; for, if great principles of freedom cannot be vindicated, their greatness does not appear. The stronger side is the successful one; and God is always plainly on the stronger side.

When we doubt our own convictions in this way, it is time to feel humiliated. If a nation has no faith in its legitimate principal, it cannot stand before an illegitimate one, be it every so puny. It is time for us to say to God, "Increase our faith in the divine nature of free labor and free men," and to ask God if it be indeed true, as some of us suspect, that he has a leaning toward the iniquity of slavery. For it comes to that, when we fall into despondency: we say virtually, that God is on the point of joining the enemy, disgusted with our failures, weaknesses, and jealousies, disheartened at our want of organizing talent and whole-souled patriotism, driven by stress of imbecility into the arms of desperate and skillful men, who make no secret of their godless intention but who nevertheless, win a kind of admiration from the Divine Mind by their gifts of pluck and strategy. God would doubtless prefer to be with us; but we are such children, with our superfine views and feelings, and have made such botchwork of the glorious lesson which he set, that he finds villanous energy more exhilarating, and will support the able

action, though it be the riveting of fetters upon men made in his image and supported by his breath.

No; such disheartening moods do not represent the general mind: we are traitors to the nation when we indulge them. This is not a contest of ambition; here are not two passions nearly matched. We fight for the supremacy of no vulgar motive. On the one hand is the yearning of all mankind for the right of owning itself, working for itself, and living intelligently for the common good. The prophets of poverty and miser have, in all ages, dreamed of that country in which men should possess their own souls and bodies, and live untrammelled to the praise of God. This prophecy of a land, in which no man, but where mankind, shall reign, dawned in the conscious hearts of our fathers, who saw that America was the land of the poor man's dream. That yearning was called once "the spirit of '76:" but it is the spirit and the fact of '63; and that, with all civilized and honorable things, all beneficent institutions, all knowledge, art, all manual and mental skill, all refined delights and manly expectations, expresses the divine intent of God.

On the other side is a direct crime against God, because an explicit contradiction of these things, in the interest of barbarism for the mass, and culture for the few. It is a crime that is four million times repeated every day. It is carved in the crouching attitude of every slave, stamped in the brutified countenance of every poor white, announced from every auction-block, where God, in the persons of his little ones, is knocked off to bidders. It poisons the edge of every bayonet, and its forked tongue darts viciously from the cannon's jaws.

Do you think that the power is on this side because the newspapers tell you that we have no generals, but a great many contractors and a horde of bunglers; that the blockade is inefficient, starvation a chimera, Knights of the Golden Circle a million strong, every ship-yard in England engaged for the rebels, and every town in America a harbor for traitors? The power is on the side of Faith. A great popular conviction that God prefers light to darkness, and democracy to aristocracy, fed by the obstinate prayers of all men and women, is the General which leads your hosts, and the draft which keeps them recruited. Every moment that your faith wavers, God feels that the North is weaker; when you believe in him, your salvation is at hand. Is there a God? and is there a difference between justice and injustice? O North Wind! blow strong with God's breath in twenty million men!

How soon the grass grows over the earthquake's edge, and down the chasm into which houses slipped, making the way they went by the stains of lacerated hearts! The little blades come and feed like insects upon every blotch of butchery, till the terror and suffering have all disappeared. So no miasma spreads; and children play up and down the green slopes where other children were swallowed up alive; and the vine-dresser

sings as he picks shrivelled grapes from the full bunches whose roots are close to the restless heat below.

Truth creeps everywhere, like vegetation, and appears the most luxuriantly upon the seams and fractures of mankind. Lovers repair unconsciously to bowers that ruins nourished to conceal their unsightliness: in those charming converts, they sit close upon moss-emblazoned epitaphs, and whisper the first intimations that they live for ever.

The Spring emphasizes the usual language of Hope with which she claims that year. It gives the grass a deeper green, and fills the buds of fruit-trees with the flavors of Autumn. In the morning I wake with such happiness, that the blue-bird which comes close to the window, upon the spray of the elm-tree, seems to be singing my own heart-full of thanks to God for the forefeeling of victory. A pleased surprise appears struggling out of the whole face of Nature. There is blood in this grass, and mounting to the topmost branches: you will see it in the apple-blossoms. It is the blood of your kindred, which seemed wasted for nothing as it ran away into the pores of the ground,--the precious drops which you would so gladly have ransomed, and remanded to the heart, if you could have done it, standing by with all your fortune, as they fell. Short-sighted husbandry of man! long-sighted economy of God! It gives America a greener spring than she has seen since Lexington. It sends into all the fruit such a flavor as is seldom tasted more than once a century. Hail, year of God's farming! Hail, summer of an emancipated continent, which shall lay up in storehouse and barn the great truths that are worth the costly dressing of a people's blood! And hail to you all, families, who show the mark of the spear in your sides over your hearts, out of which you felt some dear blood slip, till you almost swoon with the weakness and the anguish! Your blood is all safe; Republican Truth caught it as it fell, and you see your children everywhere. If we blush with pleasure, it is their blood. You cannot look in a single face without seeing them. They shall rise in the new life of a country which their own arms helped to tear from the embrace of Treason that she might be chastely wedded to Almighty Truth.

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